

Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies, and Technology

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U r s u l a B i e m a n n

The video essay *Performing the border* opens with a shot from inside a car moving through the Mexican desert near Ciudad Juarez. In the off, Bertha Jottar comments: "You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border; it's a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing there is no border, right? It's just an imaginary line, a river or it's just a wall..." (1) In this shot I was filming the woman driving the car and thus I myself inevitably became a part of the road narrative unfolding as Bertha Jottar spoke about the U.S.-Mexican border being a highly performative place. It is a place that is constituted discursively through the representation of the two nations and materially through the installation of a transnational, corporate space in which different national discourses are both materialized and transcended. It is an ambivalent space at the fringe of two societies, remote-controlled by their core powers.

E x p o r t p r o c e s s i n g z o n e

In artificial post-urban industrial parks that stretch over large desert areas, U.S. corporations assemble their electronic equipment for the communications industry. Whereas the capital-intensive operations remain in the North, the labor-intensive operations are located south of the border. Within a short time the maquiladoras - the Golden Mills - introduced a new technological culture of repetition, registration, and control into the desert cities. This is where microelectronic components are being produced for information processing, medical instruments, cyber technologies, satellite systems, identification and simulation technologies, and optical instruments for the aeronautic and military industry.

There is nothing natural about the transnational zone, and, looking at postmodern theory, it may even be that there's nothing real about it either. It is an entirely simulated place with simulated politics, a zone from which the idea of public has been thoroughly eradicated. Housing, water, transportation, telephone wires, power supply, street lighting, sewage system, health care, childcare, and schooling become the responsibility of the individual and consequently the site of spontaneous community initiatives. These ad hoc formations struggle to provide the most rudimentary social services. It's like starting all over again. Any humanist claim is out of order in this sort of place. The post-human age expressed in futuristic imagery, computer-generated for us by the hottest designer tanks in the North, is living out its dark side here on the border.

I don't mean to demonize technology, the way my own existence has been transformed by the new media into a more connected, mobile, and accelerated lifestyle is certainly one of the reasons why I decided to go to this high-tech production site and make it, if only temporarily, into my own

production site of digital visualization. Throughout this essay it will become clear, however, that the kinds of subjectivities this new transnationalism brings forth in the North are radically different from the ones it produces in the South. The representations of transnational subjects produced by global capitalism differ greatly. While discourses about residents of technology-consuming societies tend to efface specificities related to identity in favor of transnationally mobile consumers, those on the producing end become even more over-determined and restricted by gendered, sexualized, racialized, and nationalized representations. I recognize a growing need in cultural practice to locate questions of gender and other categories of identity, such as ethnicity and nationality, within the context of the wider transformations of the public sphere, particularly of urban reality. The question that interests me here is how prevailing representations relate to the material reality of a specific site, i.e. how the border as a metaphor for various kinds of marginalizations becomes materialized not only in architectural and structural measures but also in corporate and social regulations of gender. I will focus, therefore, on the circulation of female bodies in the transnational zone and on the regulation of gender relations in representation, in the public sphere, the entertainment and sex industry, and in the reproductive politics of the maquila. A vital resource for this research comes from the rich cyber-feminist theoretical debate and art practice that has recently begun exploring the entanglement of the female body with technology and image production. I will draw on these contemporary feminist discussions to examine border identities and their multifaceted subversive potential. Further, I propose a reading of the serial killings in Ciudad Juarez, for here we are given a glimpse of how urban politics, serial sexual violence, and technology converge in a dramatic way to reveal deeper layers of the psycho-social meaning of the border:

For a number of reasons the assembly plants here draw mainly young women into their labor force. Every day hundreds of women arrive in Ciudad Juarez, which is located across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. These women make up the majority of the population of the border town. They have created new living spaces and consume their own entertainment culture. They have changed social structures and gender relations and in doing so they are rewriting the texts of their bodies and their society. These women are the ones who produce the instruments that enable the kind of cyberspace that affords mobility and the freedom to consume, a freedom not enjoyed by themselves but by millions of others north of the border. Their own mobility remains confined to the limits of the "free zone" of post-fordist manufacturing. They are the new members of transnationalism, but their type of transnational citizenship functions on very different terms than that of the transnational consumer.



Communicating borders

Within the language of corporate offshore operations the designations for the U.S.-Mexican border zone are very explicit. Any facility and person can be thought of in terms of dis-assembly and re-assembly. Companies either set up or close down shop wherever the conditions are optimal. The terms used for the assembly work process have been transferred onto the person doing the work. The female worker, in particular, gets "technologized" by a post-human terminology that fragments and dehumanizes her body and turns it into a disposable, exchangeable, and marketable component. The latent violence in this kind of language has been perhaps most clearly expressed in the recent serial killings of maquiladora workers. I will return to this parallel later.

The science critic Donna Haraway has examined the role of the linguistic reformulation of new forms of domination in the information system in which everything is communicated in terms of rates, cost cuts, speed, proximity, degrees of freedom. (2) It is the language of leanness, efficiency, and competition that any corporation understands, the universal translation of terms on which to operate worldwide. Let us look at an advertisement for Elamex Communications - a maquila broker in El Paso, Texas - to see how this kind of imagery tends to reinforce certain borders of identity in reaction to the breakdown of national borders in the information society.

This particular Elamex advertisement targets U.S. corporations that are considering transferring their labor-intensive electronic assemblies to an offshore subcontractor.(3) Predictably, the ad addresses the customer in the language he understands, i.e. it communicates the desire to cut labor costs to a fraction, it communicates a certain quality assurance, tax shelter, speedy start-up, proximity to the HQ and U.S. markets, fast turnaround, low transportation costs, direct dial communication, airport proximity, etc. In these terms, labor is only a figure: \$1 per hour, but it is also represented as a depersonalized, quantifiable unit like any other incentive offered to entice manufacturers to fold their activities in the national space and set them up in the free zone. By contrast the image, I would argue, speaks an entirely different language. It communicates a web of psychological, social, and historical relations that are being suppressed by rational arguments for efficiency.

In the border zone, everyone is being transformed into transnational subjects, and ethnic peoples in particular articulate this discourse. Only bodies that allow themselves to be marked, to be exchanged, to be turned into a commodity, and to be recycled will be granted the entry visa that allows certain mobility in the transnational space. The ad operates, first of all, as a technology of surveillance in that it positions the two women it showcases within the confines of racial and sexual criteria. On the left we have what we are expected to recognize as an Aztec profile with red, white, and green silk ribbons woven into the braids, and on the right we have a generic Asian profile with a page-boy hairstyle and eyeliner that simulates slanted eyes. Both women wear some sort of national folkloric outfit, so that in addition to a racialized discourse the image clearly links the women to a generic exotic/erotic national entity. This reduces them further to a geo-body, a body that is turned into an allegory for a gendered, racialized, and nationalized body of people whose national virtues are tightly linked with corporate interests. While this procedure nationalizes the female body, it also feminizes the offshore national spaces of Mexico and the Philippines, which is the other country this ad supposedly refers to.

Historically, women's bodies have encapsulated the desire for conquest. In Anne McClintock text "the porno-tropics of the European imagination", the female figure is mapped as the boundary marker of the empire, as the mediating figure on the threshold to the feminized space of the terra

incognita. McClintock explains this formation with the profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety and boundary loss at the event of leaving the known world to explore the unfamiliar. From the outset, the feminizing of the land has been a strategy of violent containment, one belonging in the realm of both psychoanalysis and political economy.⁽⁴⁾ The production of these historically cultivated desires in the Elamex advertisement foregrounds the role these desires play in the hiring of female labor by placing the bodies of women within the fantasy narratives of colonial conquest. "Mexico beats the Far East by 10,000 miles," the headline reads. In this all too familiar scenario the two women are pitted against each other, set up to use their sexuality and femininity to compete for the favor of the male corporate employer.

Their racialized, gendered figures become the articulators of the border, that fragile line marking the fringe of the national body. It is here, according to national(ist) discourse, that all disease, illegality, contamination, and poverty come from. This is the most vulnerable, penetrable site, the place where anxieties tend to concentrate. What better site to localize the panic of national identity. Above all, U.S. customers need to be assured that the offshore female bodies are not out of control. The ad makes a point of assuring a domesticated, docile, dependable, and disciplined female workforce. Her manicured hands meet corporate standards; her face expresses seriousness, concentration, and precision, her demeanor betrays no emotions. In short, she represents the replica, the instrument itself. Holding the semiconductor in her hand, she and it become one, her body becomes inscribed in a robotic function; the chip becomes the extension of her hand and takes the place of her upper torso. Her body has become completely technologized.

A cyber-feminist view interprets the image of organic/mechanic borderline fusion as potentially empowering in that it shatters at least the attempts at creating the representation of a fixed, sovereign subject. Even though I have reservations about assigning empowering qualities to this particular Elamex image because of the gender and race clichés it cements, I recognize that it is only rarely that the low-end subjects of the high-tech complex are represented at all in the commercial context. Commercial representations ordinarily feature only designers and high-end users who then benefit from the dazzling images associated with the futuristic technologies that enhance their social image and their value in the labor market, while other contributors to the industry - e.g. secretarial staff and maintenance personnel in the office sector or technicians and assembly workers in the manufacturing sector - are systematically excluded from these representations. More often, maquila women find themselves in rather dull representations associated with poverty and exploitation discourses in sociological and development contexts. Why do I have to pay the young male technician \$120 an hour to repair my computer, whereas the young female worker who assembled it only receives \$1 an hour? What we have here is also a question of representation and its performative force.

The Elamex ad operates through a double discourse by which the apparently directly opposed registers of naturalized and technologized bodies are coordinated and managed. Here, the normative link between "the female" and "the natural" is replaced not by another clear equation but rather by the disturbing identification of the feminine with an uncertain mixture of the natural and the technological. In this entanglement of mechanism and gender, the natural female body is disarticulated, inscribed onto the machine, and individually reembodyed as the "hand" or the "eye" of a new corporate whole. These happen to be the body parts for which a maquila woman gets hired \emptyset her eyes and her fingers \emptyset because digital and microelectronic manufacturing demands both great optical precision and tactile nimbleness. But her biological components also make her fragile and vulnerable. Her eyesight is sharp enough for about eight years, but then she will have to be replaced by a fresh young worker.



Her organic vision is consumed in the making of the visualization technologies our society relies on. She belongs to the process of periodic replacement by other bodies; she needs to be continuously recycled.

The compulsive desire to see and to make visible is one of the defining features of industrial society, as Mark Seltzer analyses with great accuracy in respect to the body-machine complex at the end of the last century.(5) This desire has driven scientists and engineers to develop an arsenal of apparatuses and instruments to multiply the potencies of the human eye. In the 1990's, Rosi Braidotti has observed, the biotechnological gaze penetrated into the very intimate structure of living matter; seeing the invisible, restructuring that which has no shape yet.(6) The desire to make everything visible is also an imperative of making things legible and governable; it expresses at once a fantasy of surveillance and a need for embodiment.(7) The predominantly optical technologies manufactured on the border convey the great importance artificial vision holds for power, now and in the future. Medical and cyber optics, surveillance, x-ray satellite technologies, micro- and telescoping, AV media and virtual technologies, identification, scanning, digitizing, controlling and simulating electronics; they all engineer the relation between seeing and the exercising of power, between vision and supervision. Haraway tries to rescue the faculty of seeing from a disembodied technological cyclopean vision of the phallogocentric kind and to re-possess it for feminist discourse. In "Situated Knowledges" she pleads for an embodied objectivity and suggests that we learn to see in compound, multiple ways, in partial perspectives that shatter the idea of passive vision in favor of the notion of the eye as an active perceptual system, continuously translating, always accountable.(8)

In the present situation of what seems like a global inevitability it might be more important than ever to scrutinize what Haraway suggests are the possibilities of living and of lived femininity in a cyborg world and to reinstall notions of singularity and subjectivity within a discourse that functionalizes the female body to the extreme. Concha's story, later in the text, is an example of an unexploitative, unspectacularized case history. Many accounts have already related the mechanisms of containment that affect women's lives on the border. I chose not to focus on the instruments of repression in my video "performing the border" because I assume change is not a matter of information. But I want to describe the conditions in more detail here as they exemplify the relations between gender, body, and technology in explicit terms.

Technologies of control

The technologies of border and labor control installed in Juarez make the relations between vision, vigilance, power, and bodies violently obvious. Labor organization is strictly prohibited in Juarez, and one of the major reasons why maquiladoras prefer female workers is that they are supposed to be more docile and less likely to organize into unions. Also, since adolescent female workers are often the only ones in the family with an income, there is much pressure from male family members on women to acquiesce to existing working conditions in order to save their jobs. The maquila program relies strongly on prevailing patriarchal family relations. At any rate, in recent years the entire industrial zone has become interconnected via a computer network, and plants have established black lists with the names of undesirable persons, starting with assassins, delinquents, and "enemies" of the maquila, i.e. people trying to alter the conditions in the maquiladoras. Black lists of this sort are prohibited by law because if someone is let go by a factory, there is no chance of finding work anywhere else in the zone. Labor activist Ciprianana J. Herrera told me that she got fired, together with two other compañeras, for requesting a cafeteria.⁽⁹⁾ Their plant was located outside the industrial park, and for several hundred workers there was no place to have lunch. We weren't even talking about forming a union, about wage policies, health hazards, or human rights. Women are afraid of losing their jobs for the slightest disobedience, of never being able to find another one again, and of imposing the consequences on their families.

For the Mexican government the maquiladora program is strategically important to the economy, ranking well above any other national income from oil or tourism. The government keeps a close eye on the maquilas' interests. And we can assume that the purpose of the strong U.S. military presence is not merely to keep "illegals" from crossing the border but also to protect the gigantic U.S. industrial investment on Mexican territory. Guillermina Villalva Valdez, a leading labor activist and academic who was extremely supportive during my first visit to Juarez in 1988, died in a plane crash on her way to Texas in 1991. In the small plane, which exploded in mid air presumably because of a bomb, were also four other key figures of the labor movement. Labor activities are watched closely by the networked corporate system.⁽¹⁰⁾

Time management is another efficient means of control. For practical reasons, the industrial parks are located on the outskirts of the city. Regular public transportation doesn't go there so at the changing of the shifts private companies shuttle the workers back and forth between the city center and the plants at exorbitant fares that can swallow up to a third of one's monthly salary. Before dawn, the worker leaves the settlement at the periphery, walks to the bus station in the center of town, and takes a one-hour bus ride out to the maquila to make the morning shift at six o'clock. She spends nine hours at the plant and goes back home the same way. That leaves no time to live, no time to think, no time to organize. The workers' excruciating time investment enables the further development of technology that accelerates our lives. In his essay "Going at Different Speeds" Andrew Ross identifies speed differentials and relative time scarcity as the basic principles for uneven development in the world economy. "Beyond a critical speed," he quotes Ivan Illich, "no one can save time without forcing another to lose it."⁽¹¹⁾

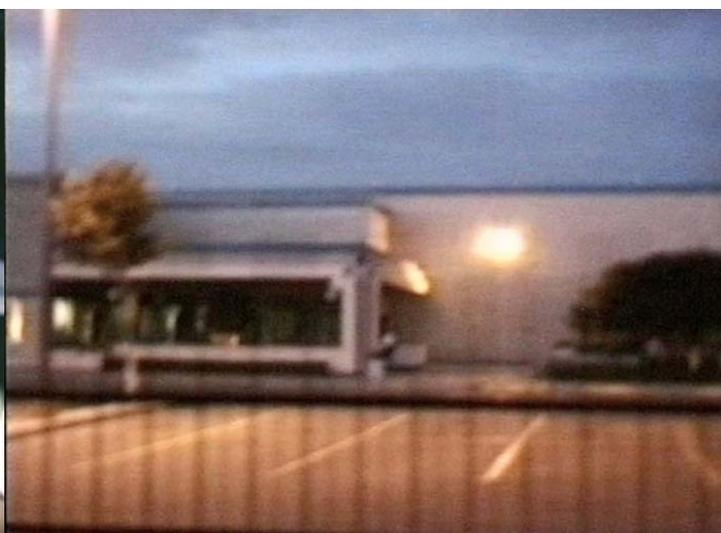
In the electronically networked maquila system every individual is identified and profiled. Time, productivity, and the body of the female worker are strictly controlled oftentimes by white male managers. The body control goes as far as to require a monthly cycle check to ensure the worker is not pregnant. Forced birth control and pregnancy tests are the order of the day and, needless to say,

pregnancy means immediate dismissal. Reproduction of these bodies becomes strictly controlled from the moment they are determined to be productive. The speedy industrialization has imposed rather violent transformations between contradictory registers of public and private spaces, between work and plant, on the one hand, and home and family, on the other; or more generally between the economic and the sexual. In Mexico, like everywhere else, these registers have traditionally been divided along the lines of sexual difference. Women took care of the domestic sphere whereas the men in the family - father, uncles, brothers - sustained the family financially. What Juarez has seen over a short period of time is the conflation of the separate spheres of the private, female, domestic space of reproduction and consumption and the public, male space of production. With the hiring of predominantly young women these traditional patterns are being forcefully transformed and, of course, not without conflict. Not surprisingly, the female worker emerges as the central figure in this conflict as she embodies the two functions of production and reproduction. She is the embodied problem that needs to be contained and managed.

Since NAFTA, the border has materialized this conflict on an ever more impressive scale in that the agreement assures the free flow of goods but prevents the free passing of people who produce the goods. The crossing of merchandise stands for good neighborly relations whereas the crossing of people is criminalized and policed. The border becomes a metaphor as well as an actual material institution that capitalizes on the differences between the economic and the sexual.

Sexualizing the territory

One of the most striking, and maybe most disturbing, insights I gained on the border is that international labor in the South is not only feminized but also sexualized. The female workers are literally interpellated in their sexuality. Structurally speaking, a young woman in Juarez has three options: either she becomes an assembly worker; if she is not accepted at the factory because of insufficient education, she can become a domestica and work as a maid in a private house; but if she can't produce a recommendation for such a position, her only option is prostitution. Yet securing a factory job is not always the end of the story. Low salaries force many women to seek supplementary income from prostitution on weekends. Sexual and labor markets interpenetrate within this economic order. The figure of \$1 per hour I cited earlier in my discussion of the Elamex ad is also responsible for sexualizing the offshore labor market because it pushes women to the verge of being reducible to



sex. The figure also means that pimping takes place on a corporate level. Not that transnationals are creaming off the profits from prostitution, but they do benefit from getting labor for pocket money by making women dependent on commodifying their bodies. Prostitution is not just part and parcel of a tax-free consumer binge; it is a structural part of global capitalism. Since the closing down of the border fence and its military enforcement in the 1990's competition has become more fierce between professional prostitutes and a growing number of young, often adolescent maquila workers who prostitute themselves on weekends. The dynamics on the border clearly show that even though customers who spend their U.S. dollars in Juarez are getting scarcer, prostitution is growing. In other words, prostitution is not generated by customer demand, as is usually thought, but by the women's need to generate income. Initially these women offered sexual services to anyone who could pay for them. Gradually, however, this situation has given rise to an entertainment industry, and it is not insignificant to note that here in Juarez where prostitution emerged from a maquila economy the sex districts are pimp free.

In the official media discourse, the border is always represented as a place of delinquency, debauchery, and prostitution, a magnet for all subjects who don't meet the moral standards of society. The media rarely wastes a word on the fact that these conditions are engineered by the maquila industry which implements the free zone plan that was designed and signed by both national administrations and the Dow Jones people. The media, it seems, has mistaken the effect for the cause. It's not that I'm particularly interested in tracing simple causality. In an overwhelmingly complex site like the border it can be more fruitful to record the synchronicity of events and to point out correspondences without necessarily building an overarching theoretical framework. Also, it seems inadequate to offer hasty interpretations for formations that are quite malleable and changeable. On the border, identities are constantly forming and collapsing, conforming and transgressing. And the last thing I want to propose is easy categories for the new types of subjectivities that are currently evolving. And one thing we must not forget is that there is much ambivalence within synchronicity caused by conflicting interests and competing desires.

It just so happens, however, that sexuality has become a site where desires for self-expression and control mechanisms converge violently. Thousands of assembly jobs have been created in the desert city of Juarez and women are the ones who get them. As gender relations are greatly determined by economics, the reversal of income patterns has had an immediate impact on the way women relate to men. For one thing, women have gained greater autonomy over their sexuality. On Friday at 4 p.m., when the assemblers leave the morning shift, hundreds of bars and dance saloons are already open for business in downtown Juarez. Ten years ago on my first shoot in Juarez the contests organized in the nightclubs were modeled on traditional gender roles. Women sucking lollipops competed on stage for male attention by performing with the most desirable body language they could muster. The winner wasn't the woman who danced erotically and assertively, but a girl who slowly stepped back and forth between two stage corners in aimless anticipation. It didn't seem like much, but the audience reacted with great enthusiasm to her nervous passivity that let their gaze take possession of her. She embodied all the visual pleasures Laura Mulvey spoke about in the seventies in regard to cinema.⁽¹²⁾ Today, in the dance halls the shift of buying power to young women is obvious. Entertainment mainly caters to female customers with male strip shows and male dance contests where women cheer in appreciation of men's sex appeal. Songs are dedicated to the girls from Torreon or from Durango, who make up the majority of maquila workers, the song lyrics often refer to female sexual desires, and the entire entertainment machine is aligned to their pleasure. The shift in

the income pattern empowers women in their personal relationships. It has enabled their overt expression of sexual desires and affords the satisfaction of these desires by economic means rather than by the more traditional ones, i.e. in the domestic setting through emotional or reproductive pathways.

T e c h n o l o g i e s o f s u r v i v a l

The continuing diasporic movement of women in transnational space attests to their flexibility, resilience, and endurance. They are often still very young Ø 13-, 14-, 15-year-olds Ø when they leave their families and travel long distances to work on the border. They come from towns like Zacatecas, Durango, Torreon, on the arid central plateau and move to the Rio Grande. They are the hope of those left behind. Often they come in small groups: three or four girls of the same age and from the same town. Upon their arrival they won't find accommodations because municipal investments are only made for the transnationals, not for the people who work for them. So they go to the edge of the settlements, which spread far out into the Sierra, choose a vacant spot, and build a shack right into the desert sand. To do this they use leftovers from the maquiladoras. Pallets will serve as walls, chemical containers become water tanks, and so forth. Some people call this procedure "invasion" because the migrants take a piece of land and settle down and wait for official papers for their houses. It may be an irregular way, but it is inevitably the only way to obtain housing. Here are vast stretches of land where mainly women live, streets of sand, no streetlights, no public transportation, and no security. It is not unusual to see young maquila women moving through their desert neighborhoods wearing the little flesh-tone prostheses that protect them from the excessive electromagnetic charges that run through their bodies during assembly and testing. They are electromagnetic discharge needles, and the workers wear them strapped to their wrists. Attached to them are pink curled cables that link the female body to the workbench. The maquila women keep the devices around their arms on weekends for fear of forgetting them on Monday morning.

It is an alien way of life: corporate culture in the morning, kneading corn dough at night. The rhythm of the barren highland gives way to optimized production modes. Life on the border teaches its inhabitants to cope with contradictions, to shift out of habitual formation on a daily basis, and to operate in a pluralistic mode because flexibility is a matter of survival. It is a life in transition and survival is a good place to start. The courage to endure the situation is a desire that exceeds power; it doesn't pretend to overcome oppression or to master it but to survive it, says Homi K. Bhabha. He proposes a philosophy of survival rather than subversion, and this seems to me to be an appropriate model at the close of this century, when postindustrial systems of production and information seem to have made oppositional mass politics utterly redundant.(13) But we should keep in mind that survival can be motivated by different situations. While intellectuals like Bhabha and cultural producers like me may choose strategies of transgressions because these seem to be of particular cultural interest at this point in time, Concha is forced into transgression by the oppressive situation she finds herself in, even if she actually prefers a different kind of life.

T r a n s g r e s s i v e i d e n t i t i e s

Even the most sophisticated technologies of surveillance have fissures and leaks, and there are holes in the border fence and trails that lead through the desert valley. It is here at night that other women help pregnant women across the border. The former know how to avoid snakebites and dehy-

dration and charge little to bring the latter safely to a U.S. hospital. In the new transnational space we will be looking for these road narratives. Transgressive trajectories express alternative desires. And even though in number and agency these nomadic transgressive subjectivities are modest, I believe, philosophically speaking, it is important to theorize them.

"I have known Concha for about five years," says Angela Escajeda while we drive out to the settlement on the periphery, "from when she used to live here in a house made from leftover materials from the maquiladora. At some point she found herself abandoned by her husband and realized that there was no chance for a pregnant woman to find work in Juarez. So Concha met someone, I don't know whether it was good or bad for her; who told her that she could sell cigarettes in the U.S. What Concha did was she would cross to the other side where she would sell her cigarettes cheaper because she didn't pay taxes, then she would buy her merchandise over there, bring it back here, take off the taxes and put it back into circulation there. Later on, based on her facility to cross and avoid the U.S. immigration officers Concha passed as a wetback. Her strategies have been multiple and variable in all her trajectories of crossing to the U.S. Concha was also confronted with the Mexican militarization of the border in 1994, when Sylvestre Reyes closed the border to the U.S., and the attitude towards people crossing was getting more and more aggressive. Concha managed to pass undercover, and at one moment in her life, without thinking about it, she started to lead people across. Her fame grew to the point where people from Central America, all the way down to Nicaragua, came to find her. She would bring them into the U.S. and charge only a small amount compared to others. Concha also often helps pregnant women who want to give birth across the border because they want to have American children. Their thinking is that they can use them one day to obtain papers and benefit from the services over there. Concha runs a 'service for pregnant women' that leaves them at the public hospital in El Paso."

Concha's narrative of transgression is a radical contradiction to the docile, knowable, manageable kinds of bodies presented in the Elamex ad. Tracing new paths that blur with the first winds, she crosses the border, moving in and out of legality. Hers is not a one-time crossing with the aim of becoming someone else on the other side. Rather, she is a subject in transit, moving through the transnational zone while finding ever-new strategies to get around the prevailing power structures on her clandestine trajectory. The figure of the "coyote" someone who smuggles people across the border expresses in a number of ways the sort of "new subjects" feminists and poststructuralists may be imagining. As the passer between cultural locations the new subject is the mediator and constant trans-



lator of different sedimentations, registers of speech, and cultural codes. When I passed by what used to be Concha's house, she had already packed up and gone. She left no forwarding address. She is not addressable in the ordinary sense by the system of citizen control. She is profoundly subversive through the fleeting, utterly mobile and transitory nature of her activity and through the dis-identification with and disloyalty to any national program. With Concha's help the pregnant, maternal body, which is ordinarily the object of great biotechnological interest and reproductive control, becomes the site of transgression. She transfers these bodies from the transnational zone, where social services are denied to them by U.S. corporate employers, to a new national space, which is ironically dominated by the same corporations but where they can still collect the benefits due to them.

In "Nomadic Subject", Rosi Braidotti reads desire as that which evades us in the very act of propelling us forward, leaving as the only indicator of who we are, the traces of where we have already been. In her terms, the nomad's identity is a map of where s/he has already been; it stands for movable diversity, an inventory of traces of what we have already ceased to be. Braidotti sees identity as a retrospective notion and nomadic cartographies as something that needs to be remapped constantly.(14) Perhaps we have come to such images of subjectivity because many people, including cultural critics and cultural producers, live diasporic, transient existences even if we admit that this type of diasporic lifestyle typical of an intellectual in the North is not equal to the one evolving in resistance to corporate politics in the South. Yet life on the border is of a permanently transitory nature, the female diasporic subject emerges as the transgressive identity. She keeps moving back and forth between rural and urban, between rudimentary survival strategies and high technology for cyber culture, between traditional folklore and robotics. She crosses the boundaries between production and reproduction and she circulates in these multi-layered spaces, making connections with local coalitions and international feminist networks on labor rights, environmental issues, human rights. Braidotti's nomadism does not mean fluidity without borders but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries. It is the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing.(15)

Serial killings

There is another, more violent aspect to the clash between bodies, sexuality, and technology in the U.S.-Mexican border zone that I want to turn to now. Since 1995, close to 200 women have been killed in Juarez and all according to a similar pattern: Poor, slender women with long dark hair, mainly workers, rarely students, have been raped, tortured, stabbed, or strangled, and tossed into the desert. Many of them had just moved to the city, nobody knew them or claimed their bodies. Fifty women are still lying in the morgue, unidentified.(16)

Women's organizations have been formed in reaction to the acute violence in the public space.(17) Most of them interpret it as violence against women, as revenge taken by men on women who have stolen their jobs, who have started to talk back to them, to go to dance halls, and generally challenge gender roles. The fact that the police haven't bothered to investigate the crimes is just another sign of male consent to this scenario. So feminists and human rights advocates took it upon themselves to investigate the cases and establish a list of missing women to prove that the cases bear too many similarities to possibly be individual crimes of passion. These groups recognize, however, that some cases are ordinary domestic violence disguised as one of the serial killings. They also understand that extreme poverty, lack of education, and economic subjugation are all conditions that prepare the ground for a criminal to come to the city and commit crimes. U.S. criminologist Robert K. Ressler,

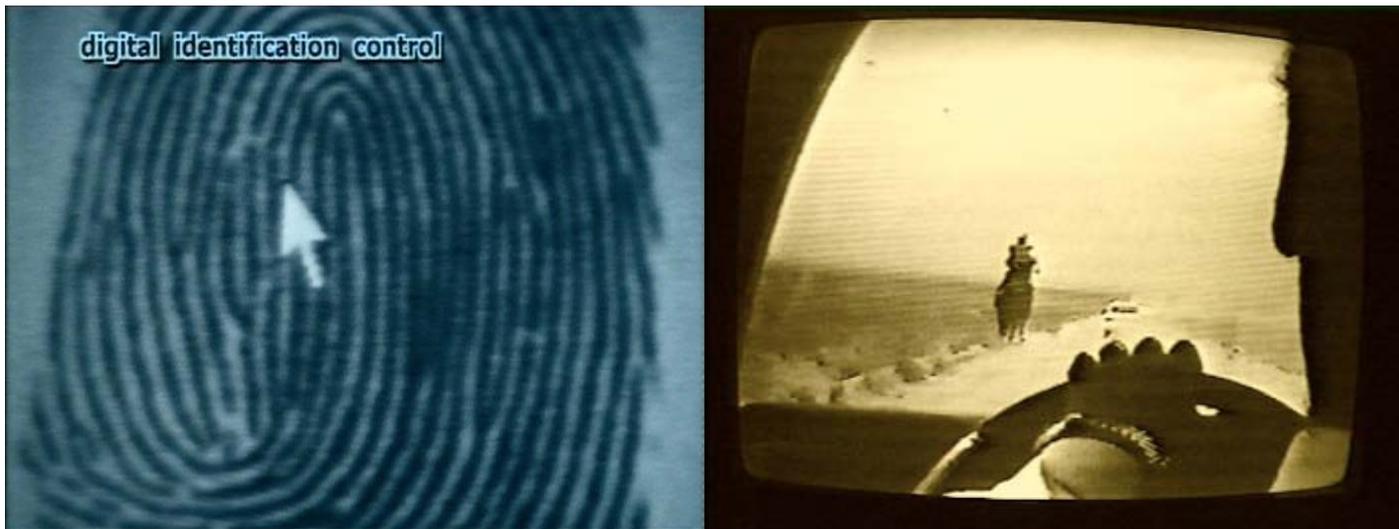
who was invited to analyze the case in Juarez, which now constitutes the largest case of serial killings known just about anywhere in the world, also points to drug traffic, gangs, migration, quick money, and prostitution as further conditions that might have led to these crimes, conditions no different than those in any major metropolis in the States. But apart from the widely scattered migration settlements, Juarez is a small border town, and serial killing is not an ordinary crime of passion. In view of the very particular constellation of economic, sexual, social, and technological factors on site generic explanations simply don't suffice.

In his recent cultural study on serial killers, Mark Seltzer draws a number of intriguing connections between sexual violence and mass technologies proper to a machine culture. Even though he never mentions this unresolved case, the relevance of his analysis to the events in Juarez is undeniable. He traces connections between this form of repetitive and compulsive violence to the styles of production and reproduction that make up machine culture and particularly relates technologies of identification, registration, and simulation to the psychological disposition of serial killers.(18)

Seltzer assigns serial killers an identity problem. "He" (with one known exception serial killers have been male) lacks boundaries. He fails to distinguish himself from others, and this lack of self-distinction, of self-difference is immediately translated into violence along the line of sexual difference which is the one fundamental difference he recognizes, writes Seltzer in his introduction "Serial Killing for Beginners." With this logic the gendered other is undistinguishable, exchangeable, and reduced to a number in a body count. Exchangeability appears to be a determining factor in the murders reported in Juarez. Not only do the victims have a similar physical profile but also the bodies are often found in locations different from where their clothes were found, which makes identification more difficult after a certain time. Perversely, many bodies are found wearing clothes that belonged to other missing women. The confusion of their belongings that might serve as identification emphasizes in literal terms the exchangeability of the bodies. Conversely, there are new distinguishing markings, marks of violence left by the killer on the body through branding and cutting.

According to Seltzer's extensive research on serial sexual violence, a common psychological denominator of the killers lies in the undoing of identity to the point of becoming a non-person, the desire to blend into the social and physical environment. There is a strange permeability of bodies and the urban environment in Juarez, where the habitat blends into the natural surroundings and the built reality blurs with the unpaved roads. The crime often happens at dawn, when the distinction between night and day is unclear and the boundaries between the private houses, the unpaved streets, and the desert around it are undistinguishable. There are large areas like this where the nominal division between public and private is blurred, in part because the public is nothing more than private improvisation. In the early morning hours, a great number of women cross through these widely undefined spaces on their way to the maquiladoras, in transit between private and work space, between desert and urban. The assimilation of the subject to the milieu becomes nowhere better realized than in this terrain where contours are virtually absent. In Seltzer's accounts we find a rich collection of wild analogies similar to this one where for the serial killer, persons and landscapes, bodies and technologies, public and private merge literally.

As I have argued, the border is a gigantic metaphor for the artificial division between these diverging concepts, as well as a site where the blurring of distinctions takes on violent forms. On the representational level, the image used by Elamex exemplifies how the act of technologizing the female body simultaneously sets identity markers of nature, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. On the material level, this process is paralleled by the robotic, repetitive process of assembly work, the intimate impli-



cation of the body with these technological functions and the association of this process with the gendered, racialized body. The serial killer, in turn, translates the violence of this entanglement into urban pathology, publicly reproducing the repetitive, disassembling, disidentifying performance on the body. What the industry constructs as consumable, disposable bodies is literally tossed into the desert nearby informal "garbage disposals." In his own morbid way, the serial killer does nothing more than to make literal and visible the prevailing discourse. The serial killer's identitary transparency makes him the perfect mediator between discourse and institution. He is THE performer.

Sexual offense and eroticized violence crosses the boundaries between the natural and the collective body, passing private desire to public spectacle. This transgression, so characteristic of the psychological configuration of the serial killer, is performed on a gendered and racialized body, and the border becomes the perfect stage for it. Losing the boundaries between the self and other, the serial killer is perpetually in search of a border. He is attracted to the border of his country, precisely because it signifies the boundary of a larger entity of belonging, the nation. Going to the border becomes the physical expression of his mental extremity, merging his physical body with the national body, confusing the inside and outside.(19)

There is a limit to my fascination with his pathological mind because, after all, he is killing women in raw numbers, for Christ's sake. But a discursive reflection on the killings allows to understand them as an urban pathology brought by a highly accelerated industrialization and modernization. Then we start to recognize how deeply the post-industrial world is implicated in the disturbing changes taking place on the border and the impact they have on the lives of Mexican women.

To look at the border involves examining issues of representation, but the performative realisation weighs on young Mexican women. They assemble the digital technology, their time and their bodies, down to their monthly cycles, are strictly controlled by the white male management, prostitution is a necessity for many in this economy which is characterized by sexual violence. Feminists in Juarez have the courage to survive - and beyond that to struggle - under repressive conditions, to say no to indifference and exploitation. I acknowledge every effort they make to support other women in finding better and alternative ways of living on the border, for in doing so they are rewriting the text of their subjectivity and society as it changes and as they change it.

- 1) Bertha Jottar, Mexican artist, introduces the video essay "performing the border" (43 min. 1999).
- 2) Donna J. Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto, in: "Simians, Cyborgs, and Women - the Reinvention of Nature" (NY: Routledge, 1991).
- 3) Elamex is the largest contract manufacturer in Mexico with annual sales of 129 million U.S. dollars (in 1998) and 17 manufacturing plants with operations in electronic and electro-mechanical assembly for the automotive, telecommunications, computer peripheral, military, and medical industries. This ad circulated in industrial trade magazines in the mid-eighties. (www.elamex.com)
- 4) Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context (NY: Routledge, 1995), pp. 23-24.
- 5) Mark Seltzer, Bodies and Machines (NY: Routledge 1992) p. 95.
- 6) Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1994) p. 43.
- 7) Mark Seltzer, Bodies and Machines (NY: Routledge 1992) p. 96.
- 8) Donna J. Haraway, Situated Knowledge, in "Simians, Cyborgs, and Women - the Reinvention of Nature" (NY: Routledge, 1991).
- 9) Cipriana Herrera works for CISO, Centro de investigacion y solidaridad.
- 10) Guillermina Villalva Valdez was founder of COMO, centro de organisation para mujeres obreras where women workers were educated and politicized.
- 11) Andrew Ross, Going at Different Speeds, in Readme! Filtered by nettime, (NY Audonomeia, 1999), p. 174.
- 12) Laura Mulvey, Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema, Art After Modernism, Rethinking Representation, ed. Brian Wallis (The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984) reprinted from Screen 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975).
- 13) Homi K. Bhabha recently gave a lecture in Zurich in the context of an exhibition and symposium on cultural practice in South Africa.
- 14) Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects, p. 35.
- 15) Idem. p. 36.
- 16) from conversations with Judith Galaza, of CICH, human rights organization.
- 17) March 8, CISO, a circle of 9 journalists, CICH.
- 18) Mark Seltzer, Serial Killers - Death and Life in America's Wound Culture (NY: Routledge, 1998).
- 19) Mark Seltzer quotes Anne Rule in his introduction, the true crime writer Serial Murders: Hearing on Patterns of Murders Committed by One Person, in Large Numbers with No Apparent Rhyme, Reason, or Motivation (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984).